

Developing Competent Practitioners

In California's model for retaining new teachers, support providers help novice teachers have successful experiences in the classroom.

Although most professions help recent graduates slowly make the transition into their new responsibilities, school districts give beginning teachers the same duties as veteran teachers. Because new teachers do not arrive on the first day of school equipped to manage the job single-handedly, the gap between district expectations and new teacher capabilities

often results in a stressful induction period. Most school districts want to support and retain new teachers but lack a clear model for doing so.

California now has such a model. The goal is to lower the attrition rate of novices entering the teaching profession while promoting long-term professional growth. Rather than hire mentors to put bandages on daily problems,

California is field-testing a model that supports new teachers to become competent practitioners through a four-step process: planning, teaching, reflecting, and applying.

The California Model

The California model—Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment/California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers (BTSA/CFASST)—is a reflective assessment process based on the premise that teachers learn good practices over several years of study, through consultation with experienced colleagues, and by utilizing reflective practice beyond academic preparation (California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, 1998). Teachers accomplish these objectives through an ongoing process of planning and teaching lessons, reflecting on the results, and then making informed changes.

The facilitating colleagues in this process are called *support providers*. Selected for their competency in the



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classroom and for their communication skills, support providers develop a trusting relationship with their novices by meeting both formally and informally on a regular basis. But unlike many mentoring programs, the BTSA/CFASST process expands the traditional relationship between new teachers and veteran staff in unique ways. The following questions and answers elaborate on the California model.

What is a competent practitioner and how does a new teacher become one?

A competent practitioner examines the teaching context, selects and implements teaching practices for

New teachers must learn to observe outcomes and determine the reasons for success or failure.

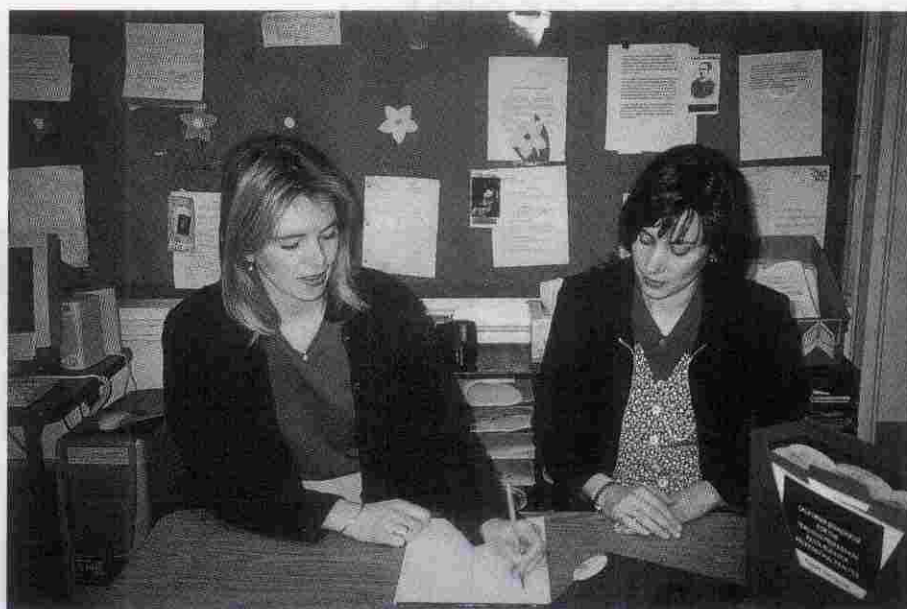


Photo courtesy of Caroline A. Lucas

New teachers who engage in the developmental cycle of planning, teaching, reflecting, and applying what they have learned are on the road to becoming competent practitioners.

that context, and continually seeks improvement. The new teacher accomplishes this through a cycle of planning, teaching, reflecting, and applying knowledge into practice.

■ *Thinking ahead.* New teachers need guided planning opportunities and help to focus on the context of their teaching situations; they must ask themselves, What do I know? and What do I need to know to teach my students? Support providers help them gather information and develop a plan for implementation. For example, one novice began the year by completing a class, school, district, and community profile. The support provider assisted her in locating important information about her students: the numbers of gifted students, second-language learners, and students qualifying for special services. They identified the numbers of working and nonworking parents, single-parent families, and students commuting from outside the district boundaries. Although the support provider helped develop contacts with district personnel who provided information about district trends, community housing arrangements, and local business partnerships, the new teacher made the calls and looked up the information. This helped her become familiar with not only the

context for teaching, but also the location of data and key district personnel.

Together they used this information to plan. Considering the language needs of her students enabled the teacher to list resources for second-language learners. Knowing which businesses offered support for public schools allowed her to gather materials and to arrange speakers for special projects. Evaluating the number of children reading above grade level informed her of the need to locate enrichment materials and to plan extension opportunities. Being aware of her students' family support enabled her to plan appropriate and reasonable homework assignments. Because she knew how students were transported to school, she was better able to plan before- and after-school activities, such as glee club and homework tutorials. Before the year started, she had already identified students with special needs and contacted the resource specialist about classroom modifications. All these ideas became part of her plan for effective teaching.

■ *Trying it out.* Teachers need to test what they have developed. With the help of their support providers, they can experience success and failure throughout the learning process without administrative repercussions.

Support providers observe beginning

teachers several times during the school year as they implement the detailed plans they designed together. For instance, one item in a 5th grade teacher's plan was to increase the time on task of students who finish work early. Specifically, his plan stated that he would give the students writing assignments with more depth, provide more extension-writing activities for those who continued to finish early, and develop lessons on the use of adjectives. He created lists of adjectives with his students, established writing folders for works in progress, and taught lessons about the thesaurus. He tried out his plan for several weeks with feedback from the support provider and discovered that these teaching methods worked.

■ *Taking a second look.* Reflection is an important part of professional development. Teachers need to look at their intended objectives and to determine their effectiveness. New teachers must learn to observe outcomes and to determine the reasons for success or failure. The role of the support provider is to guide the novice in reflective experiences, such as examining delivery of instruction and student outcomes. BTSA/CFASST support providers are trained to make and record objective observations of beginning teachers.

New teachers in California become familiar with the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, 1997); therefore, when provided with objective feedback after an observation, teachers center their reflective conversation on when and how they meet or fall below any given standard.

Within each California Standard are several Descriptions of Practice (California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, 1998) that are being field-tested. One description shows a classroom setting in which all the students are engaged and transitions are seamless. The support provider who observed the teacher described earlier recorded the number of students completing their work early and the tasks in which they became engaged. During their follow-up reflective conference, the support provider and the beginning teacher discovered that off-task students had decreased considerably and that more than half the students began using their thesaurus when they finished their writing assignments. However, they discovered that several students went off task during the lesson transition. As part of his reflection, the beginner teacher examined the benefits and effectiveness of his plan to increase time on task as well as the manner in which he conducted transitions. He then measured them against the Description of Practice. This reflection on his own practice enabled him to refine his plan.

■ *Getting better all the time.* Reflection is beneficial only to a point; when teachers apply their learning, they change and improve their teaching. The support provider assists the beginner in determining ways to use what he or she has learned to enhance student growth. In this example, the new teacher experimented with a variety of transition activities to determine which would help him achieve the standard. He decided to teach his class a poem to recite during transitions; the end of the poem signified the beginning of the next activity.

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How does a support provider assist in this developmental cycle?

■ *Preconference.* Teacher observations and conferences take place several times during the year. To reduce the anxiety of the novice, they are always prescheduled and confidential. Support providers discuss the goals for student learning, the relevance of the goals, and how the content of the lesson builds on what the students have already learned. They discuss the choices for student grouping and instructional strategies, as well as the activities and time allotment.

Through reflective conferences after classroom observations, support providers help the novices identify areas of strength and of needed improvement.

■ *Observation.* Support providers observe their assigned novices in 45-minute blocks and record objective notes from their observation. They pay particular attention to areas of interest to the new teacher. They record observation data in categories according to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession.

■ *Postconference.* The new teachers and their support providers engage in a postconference to discuss how goals were or were not appropriate for the students. Support providers guide a reflective discussion on the effectiveness of the instructional strategies and choices for student grouping.

■ *Select area of inquiry.* Support providers assist beginning teachers with in-depth explorations of certain aspects of their teaching. Inquiries may relate to delivery of instruction, classroom environment, diagnoses of

student learning, or other areas determined by the beginning teacher. As part of the inquiry process, a support provider might give a new teacher articles to read and arrange for observations and consultations with exceptional colleagues.

■ *Formulate an action plan.* After gathering information on the selected aspect of teaching through reading, consultation, or inservice work, support providers formulate a plan of action for novices to try in the classroom.

How does a support provider assist new teachers to meet school and district expectations?

After the cycle of planning, teaching, reflecting, and applying, novices consider their practice as a whole.

An individualized learning plan assists new educators in determining and listing teaching strengths, areas for growth, district goals, and personal goals.

Through reflective conferences after classroom observations, support providers help the novices identify areas of strength and of needed improvement. For instance, within the California standard called "Creating and Maintaining Effective Environments for Student Learning," a new teacher might select "Using instructional time effectively" as an area of strength and "Creating a physical environment that engages all students" as an area for professional growth. To achieve the district's goals of accelerating literacy, the teacher might develop a learning plan that incorporates seminars on literacy circles, reading centers, and flexible grouping strategies. This would enable her to gather new information

about her area of needed improvement, "engaging all students," while meeting district requirements to attend inservice sessions on literacy. To meet her school's priorities of increasing the use of technology to improve student outcomes, she might attend an educational Internet institute as part of her plan. This would enable her to meet her school's expectations while gaining skills for her professional goals.

From Mentors to Service Providers

At a time when we need quality educators more than ever, we must retain, not lose, new teachers entering the profession. To lower the attrition rate and to promote long-term professional growth, school districts must provide beginning teachers with support. However, the traditional mentor role can be expanded to help teachers reach high levels of

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competency. The California program gives new teachers support providers to assist them with the ongoing process of planning, teaching, reflecting, and applying in the classroom what they have learned. ■

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